



National Center for State Courts

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

New Mexico Justice C. Shannon Bacon to receive William H. Rehnquist Award for Judicial Excellence

Bacon has helped lead a national push to reform legal education and bar admission, and champions a model for bringing legal services to New Mexico's most underserved rural communities

WILLIAMSBURG, Va. (Aug. 19, 2026) — New Mexico Supreme Court Justice C. Shannon Bacon has been named the recipient of the 31st Annual William H. Rehnquist Award for Judicial Excellence, the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) announced today. The award is the nation's premier honor for state court judges, recognizing the integrity, fairness, and courage that exemplify the legacy of the late Chief Justice of the United States William H. Rehnquist.

"Justice Bacon has a gift for finding the hard, structural problems — legal education, rural access, judicial pay — and staying with them for years until they're meaningfully addressed. That kind of patience and follow-through is exactly what this award was created to recognize. She is also, simply, a joy to work alongside," said NCSC President Elizabeth Clement.

Justice Bacon will receive the award from Chief Justice of the United States John G. Roberts, Jr., during a ceremony at the Supreme Court of the United States this November.

"To be named as the recipient of the William H. Rehnquist Award for Judicial Excellence is a tremendous honor. This award reflects the hard work and dedication of so many people, all for whom I am incredibly grateful," said Justice Bacon.

A track record measured in results

Appointed to the New Mexico Supreme Court in 2019 and elected the state's fifth woman to serve as Chief Justice from 2022 to 2024, Justice Bacon has spent more than 15 years working to make state courts more accessible, better resourced, and more trusted — not through isolated initiatives, but through a sustained commitment to the underlying health of the legal system itself:

- **Reforming legal education, from CLEAR to New Mexico's own courts.** As vice chair of the Conference of Chief Justices/Conference of State Court Administrators' Committee on Legal Education and Admissions Reform (CLEAR), Justice Bacon helped guide the committee's landmark first report, released in July 2025, which set out nine recommendations for legal education and bar admission reform. She now chairs CLEAR's new working group on law school accreditation, launched in February 2026. Justice Bacon has also translated that national work into concrete change at home, serving on the New Mexico Supreme Court's study committee behind the state's new skills-based pathway to law licensure, approved in August 2026.
- **Closing New Mexico's "legal deserts."** Four of New Mexico's 33 counties have no practicing attorney at all, and nearly all the state's roughly 5,000 lawyers are concentrated in three counties. Justice Bacon designed and championed the judiciary's Rural Justice Initiative, including a two-year clerkship program that places new law graduates directly under the guidance of rural district chief judges — turning the initiative into a functioning program other states are now watching.
- **Expanding access to justice.** Justice Bacon led efforts to eliminate court fines and fees in adult criminal and traffic cases, end driver's license suspensions for unpaid court debt, and help stand up a statewide eviction diversion program during the pandemic that reached households in all 33 New Mexico counties.
- **Strengthening the judiciary itself.** Justice Bacon spent more than a decade building support among legislators and the bar for judicial pay reform, helping raise New Mexico's judicial compensation by more than 51% and move the state from 48th to 12th nationally in judicial pay — ensuring the bench can continue to attract experienced attorneys.

"She created such a positive and uplifting environment"

Colleagues describe Justice Bacon as a leader who invests as much in the next generation as in policy. Areli Garcia, the first in her family to attend college, interned in Justice Bacon's chambers as a high school student and said the experience changed the course of her life. "She created such a positive and uplifting environment, and her energy made it easy to stay motivated and curious," Garcia said.

Justice Bacon has said she hopes that ethic spreads across the profession, describing the law as "a noble profession — one that can change the world or change the life of a child."

Background

Before joining the New Mexico Supreme Court, Justice Bacon served nine years as a trial judge on the state's largest district court, presiding over complex litigation, guardianship, election, and family law matters. She began her legal career as a law clerk on the New Mexico Court of Appeals and later practiced complex litigation and appeals at two Albuquerque law firms. She earned her bachelor's degree in history and her J.D. from Creighton University and was selected as a Rodel Judicial Fellow.

About the William H. Rehnquist Award for Judicial Excellence

The William H. Rehnquist Award for Judicial Excellence is one of our nation's highest judicial honors. Presented annually, this prestigious award honors a state court judge who demonstrates the outstanding qualities of judicial excellence, including integrity, fairness, open-mindedness, knowledge of the law, professional ethics, creativity, sound judgment, intellectual courage, and decisiveness. The award recognizes judges who are taking bold steps to address various issues affecting their communities.

About the National Center for State Courts

The [National Center for State Courts](#) is a nonpartisan organization that supports the state courts that handle roughly 98% of all legal cases filed in the United States — approximately 70 million cases each year. NCSC serves as the secretariat for the Conference of Chief Justices and the Conference of State Court Administrators, and, through research, education, and practical tools, helps courts remain fair, effective, and accessible for the communities they serve.

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